"ARE EDUCATED WOMEN UGLY?" STIGMATIZING WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Months ago in a class of my doctorate program, a male classmate and the professor started a discussion about educated women's relative ugliness claiming that women who enter higher education are uglier than the less educated. After participation in this debate, I wondered if women are always judged by their appearances regardless of their accomplishments. I interviewed 20 male and 10 female lecturers of different academic levels in the social science departments of three major public universities about their idea on educated women's relative ugliness. I found out that 14 male lecturers agreed with the idea and offered different explanations for the relative ugliness of educated women such as their inability to find a husband that helps them focus on their studies; their desire to seek attention; and a way to win the natural sexual competition with other women. 4 male lecturers declared they never paid attention to their female students' looks and the other 2 male respondents believed the idea was right not only about women but also men. Among 10 female lecturers, 6 respondents found the idea stigmatizing; 3 respondent noted that it might be right for several reasons such as undesirability of ugly women for marriage and their inclination to act masculine which helps them gain educational achievements; and 1 interviewee believed that the idea is applicable to men, not women. The results show the high emphasis on the relationship between beauty and femininity; they also indicate that women are judged by their appearances regardless of their position and social status. Beauty is a means to undermine women's achievements in a culture that expects them to give up personal achievements. The stigma of ugliness is the penalty women pay for entering in to the masculine arena of higher education.

Field of Research: Beauty, gender, education, feminine, stigma, ugliness

1. Introduction

Months ago in a class of my doctorate program, a course in sociology of mental health, a male classmate and the professor started a discussion about educated women's relative ugliness. They were claiming that women who enter higher education are uglier than the less educated. The discussion was depicted as a ‘scientific’ one and the advocates of the idea brought up several examples from their extensive observations on the matter. The discussion turned in to a hot debate when a female classmate opposed the idea by saying that it is a sexist idea of no scientific value and the notion of beauty is not a fixed concept that everybody agrees up on, but rather a relative one. After defeating my sense of humiliation, I wondered if women are always judged by their appearances regardless of their accomplishments in the collegiate arena. The fact is that we are always judging and being judged by our appearances; but sexist or not, the claim that highly educated women are less attractive was a kind of claim that I, as a female student/lecturer, would never expect to hear from my colleagues/classmates/professors in the social science department.

It is a somehow universal reality that women are a minority is higher education. Women’s positioning as university lecturers, faculty members and managers and directors has always been...
challenged. Studies in Iranian universities show that university positions are occupied by a disproportionate majority of male lecturers, faculty members and part time lecturers (Rahbari, 2013). The male dominance increases in upper stairs of the ladder. Javaheri and Dariapour’s (2008) study shows that averages of 8.2 percentages of Iranian universities’ chairs are occupied by women.

It is a fact that in a patriarchal system, such as Iranian society, women have to work harder than men to achieve similar positions. In such environments ruled and dominated by masculine ideology, it is even harder to function well under the effect of stress which is produced by stigmatization of the physical body.

In this article, I will explore the general idea of social science professionals about the theory of ‘relative ugliness of highly educated women’. I will use the words men/women and female/male repeatedly. It is necessary to mention that these notions are not referred to as essentialist biological qualities but instead as socially constructed frameworks. The notions of beauty/ugliness are also not believed to be universal traits but local perceptions of physical perfection which are highly various according to culture and collectively shaped aesthetic taste.

2. Theoretical Framework

Perceptions of ‘beauty’ and ‘ugliness’ are not considered universally similar. People in different geographical locations and in different times in history have called a great variety of characteristics ‘beautiful’. It is a fact that we are affected by what we see in the everyday life and our understanding about beauty is also contextually negotiated with other social actors in the community in a rather unconscious way. Although the accounts of beauty and ugliness have been changing and approaching a more universal pattern, the local accounts of beauty are still available and valid.

Some scholars have suggested that women’s situation in the history has not experienced much change for the better or the worst because the same patriarchal processes have always been the main organizers of women’s lives. Bennett has called this ‘patriarchal equilibrium’ suggesting that stasis rather than change might best describe women’s status across the centuries (Bennett, 2005: 153). The same idea can be suggested for the representations of female beauty in the history of art since the ancient Greece. Women have always been represented either as idols of beauty and innocence or ugly monstrous and evil beings. Beauty has been attributed to purity and ugliness to the evil in the course of art history. Gods and goddesses, saints and angels have been depicted with beauty and monsters, witches and devils with great ugliness. The same pattern goes on through till the modern times when beauty becomes more versatile and variant. The question is ‘have we freed ourselves from the ideology too?’ and ‘Are we not attributing beauty to people we approve of and ugliness to those who cross our invisible lines of right and wrong?’

Goffman (1963) is one of the prominent scholars to theorize stigmatization. He defines stigma as a process by which an individual with an attribute which is deeply discredited by the society is rejected as a result of that attribute; in this process the identity of the individual is highly spoiled. There are several examples of stigmatization in the social and psychological literature of women, especially in regard with stigmatization of women’s appearance. The most focused on stigmas are related to weight and obesity (Rothblum, 1992; Puhl and Heauer, 2009).

I will suggest that in the case of educated women’s appearance, there seems to be a labeling process at work. In the case of educated women, is ugliness a fact or a stigma? Could the attribute that is discredited not be the lack of beauty, but high degree of education or occupying positions that are considered originally unfit for women? I will try to find out the answers by exploring explanations made by the advocated of educated women’s relative ugliness.
3. Research Method

Findings have been extracted from Interviews conducted with 20 male and 10 female lecturers of different academic levels. Respondents are either lecturers who hold a PhD degree or are PhD candidates in the social science departments of three major public universities. I started my interview with narrating the actual scenario that took place in my class and then asked the interviewees about their opinion on the subject; whether they agreed or disagreed with my professor in regard with educated women’s relative ugliness. After receiving the answer to the first question, I encouraged the respondents to explain their opinion. As all respondents were social scientists with higher education, they were asked to provide sociological – anthropological explanations to defend their remark on the first question. As the gender differences in answers seemed significant I have reported the answers by male and female respondents separately.

4. Summary of Findings

4.1 Findings from male respondents

Among twenty male respondents, fourteen male lecturers (70% of male respondents and 46.6% of the whole sample) agreed with the main idea that women who enter higher education, especially doctorate degree candidates might be uglier than less educated women. Four male lecturers (20% of male respondents and 13.3% of the whole sample) declared they never paid any attention to their female students' appearance and they cannot comment on the matter. Two interviewees (10% male respondents and 6.6% of the whole sample) believed the idea was right not only about women but also generalizable to men.

Respondents offered different probable explanations for the relative ‘unattractiveness’ of educated women. One popular explanation was less attractive women’s inability to find a husband. An interviewee explains:

Beautiful women are more likely to marry at early ages (...) marriage responsibilities and kids keep them away from educational achievements.

Another interviewee gives a similar explanation, but mentioning also the effects of males’ tendency to choose mates among the more beautiful candidates:

Young beautiful girls might get lots of attention. More beautiful students might marry first because they get more marriage (...) others can focus better on their studies because they are attracting less attention (...) by getting a good degree they can also increase their chances of marriage.

Women’s choice and decision making has been ignored in the above quotation. As mentioned by the interviewee, he believes that mating choice is decided by males among the most beautiful females while the less beautiful are left out to carry out other attention seeking activities. Women’s activities are deduced as a way of struggle for sexual attraction and sexual choice is considered to be a masculine advantage. The sexual competition theory is mentioned by other interviewees. An interviewee explains:

Education is a resource to win the sexual competition among women, just as beauty is (...) Beauty is inherited. Those having it don’t feel the urge to go after other resources (...) others try to gain access to other resources. So it is expected that they try to prove themselves in studies.
Anthropology and revolutionary psychology have discussed the mechanisms of sexual choice in mating. In this literature bodily beauty is discussed as the main trait by which men rank women (Grammar, Fink, Moller and Thornhill, 2003). Grammar, Fink, Moller and Thornhill (2003) also discuss that although the beauty standards are changing over time, the psychological process stays the same. The process is not appropriated by men and female choice is also important in the outcome; however it has been claimed that male choice has been central in women’s mating competition because females could not constrain the choices of larger and more aggressive males (Puts, 2010).

There is also evidence of tendency to correlate beauty with femininity among the male respondents. Women who do not benefit from enough beauty are considered to be acting masculine:

Physical beauty is an important trait that affects women’s life course after puberty (…) Less attractive woman tend to act masculine and imitate men (…) I have seen this among our female colleagues. I have read that masculine women are more successful in their careers.

Whether women act like men in workplace to fit in to the male dominated context or to conceal their lack of beauty under a mask of masculinity is a question that needs to be explored further. However studies show that women are still facing gender stereotypes that describe adjectives such as ‘competitive’ and ‘aggressive’ as masculine (Moran, 1992: 478). Women are believed to be essentially unfit for such characteristics which are generally considered to be required for every leading position at any workplace. In a context in which masculine norms of behaviour are privileged or rewarded, while feminine norms are devalued or discouraged (Litwin, 2009), imitating men is the survival strategy.

Two male interviewees believe that educated people are less attractive and there is no gender difference in the relative beauty/ugliness of highly educated people. One respondent mentions carelessness about one’s appearance as a virtue earned by educated people:

I would not say beauty but attraction, and it is the same for men and women in the academia (…) women and men with higher education tend to care less about their appearances. They don’t spend as much attention to their looks as others (…) It is a consequence of getting more education I suppose; the age and time factor are also influential.

Another respondent similarly mentions:

I think we can say the same thing about men. In a society like ours where beauty is such an asset, beautiful girls and boys are more probable to marry at young ages and settle down. Naturally, that makes it harder for them to pursue their studies.

The general idea held by majority of respondents is either that success in being an ideal traditional woman demands a certain amount of beauty or beauty is an obstacle in gaining educational success. Although only one respondent declares directly that ‘it is much better for both men and women if women fulfill domestic tasks’, it seems that most male respondents also believe that the recent increase in women’s participation in higher education in Iranian society is not ‘for the best’. As predicted, female traditional roles are favored more by the respondents.

### 4.2 Findings from female respondents

Among ten female lecturers, six respondents (60% of female respondents and 20% of the whole sample) found the idea stigmatizing and baseless; three respondents (30% of female respondents and 10% of the whole sample) noted that it might be right for several reasons such as undesirability.
of less attractive women for marriage. It is also discussed that inclination to act masculine and not to pursue beauty ideals helps them gain educational achievements. One interviewee (10% of female respondents and 3.3% of the whole sample) believed that the idea is applicable to men, not women. Stigmatization of working women is perceived to be a result of perceived displacement from positions traditionally allocated to women. An interviewee explains:

Calling women ugly bears the same logic as calling women with sexually disgracing words. They can’t find a fault in you except being women which is too true to be objected. They want to show their disgust so they ascribe you such general attributes like ugly (...) not only men; some women who hold sexist ideology do the same. It is not a new thing to hear a woman call another ugly. In women it is called ‘jealousy’ but when men use it they will try to convince you it is a ‘scientific’ fact.

According to the above respondent’s opinion, it is the sexist ideology that brings up such ideas as calling educated women ‘ugly’, ‘sensitive’, ‘weak’ or merely ‘feminine’. These adjectives all bear negative significance not because of their essence but because they are considered as female bio-psychological traits. The question is, according to her, not whether educated women are uglier or not, but why educated women would be called ugly while no one raises the same question about men. So any remark about beauty is highly gendered.

Another respondent gives a similar comment by pointing out the new increase in women’s participation in higher education:

Let them call us ugly. They are just mad we are getting all the best positions slowly and things are not as they had been before.

A respondent opposes the idea by theorizing beauty as a dynamic notion that changes not only in the course of history but also in the course of every individual life. She also mentions that such a remark cannot be supported scientifically. ‘Do we even have a general agreement on what beauty means? Does not it change every day? (...) I think it is impossible to accept such a theory because of its incommensurability’, she explains.

A respondent blames the official standards of clothing and the university dress code as a reason for such perceptions about professional women working at universities and other educational institutions:

The dress code has a role to play. You know, what we wear at university, this official uniform is making us look ugly (...) it is affecting the way people perceive our appearance.

There is also a respondent who discusses the idea from a functional point of view. In her viewpoint, even opening such discussions is sexually discriminating and it is better to avoid opening any such debates in the workplace.

Workplaces are already very stressful for women. The last thing we need is another source of stress (...) ideas of pretty – ugly are existent of course, that is a reality and every man and women is judged by them; to pursue them is both impossible and time-consuming.

The other two female respondents believe that there might be a correlation between common ideas of beauty and women’s choices to pursue studies. They point out that undesirability of women for marriage due to the general ideas of physical perfection can indirectly affect their choices in the life course. They also mention that some women’s inclination to act masculine helps them gain educational achievements. Women who are more careless about their appearance, women with a ‘deep voice’ and with a degree of ‘arrogance’ are more successful in their positions, while others are considered too feminine to be fitting.
5. Discussion and conclusion

Beauty has always been important in the history. There is not a general consensus in defining the ideal beauty as standards of beauty vary across cultures and change over time (Fallon, 1990). For most of the human history beauty and bodily perfection has been considered to be a sign of purity and a reflection of the heart. Today, despite all the changes in the meaning of beauty and the variety of characteristics attributed to the concept, it is still perceived in regard with our ideas of good and evil. Ugly is then, people or things that are not doing what they are supposed to be doing; or is occupying spaces that are not supposed to be occupying.

I started this article with a personal experience which brought up a question in my mind. In the course of conducting my research it became clear to me that beauty is not the main issue discussed by my respondents but femininity. More educated women are not uglier. Women with higher degrees are perceived to be uglier because they are less feminine either because of their positions or because of their behavior; and nothing can be uglier than a woman not being like a woman. Simply put, these women are called less attractive because they are standing behind the tribune instead of the stove.

‘Women are expected to be beautiful’, as one of the male interviewees implies and not being it can disturb one’s life. We can indicate that women are primarily judged by their appearances by men and by other women regardless of their position and social status.

The results extracted from 30 interviews with university lecturers in social science suggest that there is a high emphasis on the relationship between beauty and femininity among male scholars. There is significant difference between the explanations of the interviewees based on their gender. Some male respondents hold sexist ideology about women’s roles and traits. These ideas are essentialist. Majority of female respondents oppose to the main idea and find it stigmatizing. The common idea among male respondents is that holding a good position at a university is just compensation for the not being beautiful enough to enjoy an early marriage.

It has been discussed by other scholars that pursuing beauty ideals has negative psychological effects on women (Saltzberg and Chrisler, 1995), but it also has social and political consequences. The irony is that women are humiliated for what they are forced to do. By pursuing beauty, women try to fit the social expectations for which they are condemned to stigmas such as ‘consumerist’, ‘trivial’ or simply ‘feminine’. The same ideology reflects itself in the language as the adjective ‘feminine’ bears a negative significance in Farsi language. Ironically, women who do not pursue beauty ideals are called ‘ugly’ and ‘unattractive’.

Another interesting finding is that the respondents, being professionals in social science, hold very static ideas of the notions of ‘beauty’ and ‘ugliness’. Only a few point out the relativity of these concepts. As for the main question of the article, it seems that beauty is a means to undermine women’s achievements in a culture that expects them to give up personal achievements for traditional roles. The stigma of ugliness is the penalty women pay for entering in to the masculine and male dominated arena of higher education.

References


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